

FINAL REPORT  
TO  
NATIONAL FISH AND WILDLIFE FOUNDATION

Florida Right Whale Coordinator

March 31, 2006

**SUMMARY**

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) hired a right whale coordinator with funds provided by the grant. The coordinator has significantly contributed to right whale recovery activities by acting as co-chair of the Southeast U.S. Right Whale Implementation Team, participating as a team member of the federal Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team, completing mandatory aerial survey underwater egress training, conducting right whale aerial surveys, completing classroom and field disentanglement training (level three) both in the southeast and northeast regions, receiving genetic biopsy sampling training and collaborating with various agencies and organizations to plan for enhanced disentanglement response efforts. The coordinator contributed to multi-agency disentanglement efforts off the calving area during the past two seasons. In addition, the coordinator facilitated a field effort to obtain photo-documentation of the 28<sup>th</sup> mother/calf pair seen in the Southeast during the 2004-2005 season. The photo-documentation occurred outside of the typical aerial survey period and would have been missed had the coordinator not pursued documentation the pair. The documentation of this pair is a noteworthy contribution to population monitoring efforts.

**SYNOPSIS OF ACTIVITIES**

**Training**

The coordinator completed required aircraft underwater egress training in Lafayette Louisiana. This training is required of all aerial observers participating in the NOAA funded Right Whale Early Warning Surveys (EWS) and is designed to familiarize observers with lifesaving procedures in the event of a ditching at sea. The coordinator attended the 2005 National Marine Mammal Stranding Network Conference in Lansdowne, VA. He also attended Incident Command training while at this conference. The coordinator traveled to Provincetown, Massachusetts to complete a formal Atlantic Large Whale Disentanglement Network (ALWDN) apprenticeship administered by the Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies (PCCS). At the completion of the apprenticeship, the coordinator's skills and abilities were evaluated and he was designated a disentanglement network Level III responder. The ALWDN operates under federal authority of the National Marine Fisheries Service and receives major support from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Northeast Consortium. (fig. 1) At the invitation of the New England Aquarium, the coordinator traveled to Lubec, Maine to

train with their field team on right whale photo-id and biopsy techniques. This training is a key component of Florida's contribution to the collaborative effort to biopsy right whales in the calving area. (fig. 2)

### **Disentanglement**

The coordinator, working in collaboration with other agencies and organizations including NOAA Fisheries, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, and the Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies, participated in the successful disentanglement of an entangled whale, nick-named "Yellowfin" for the U.S. Coast Guard cutter crew that provided essential assistance. The coordinator also participated in the partial disentanglement of a second right whale which was first observed entangled off the coast of Georgia. The coordinator participated in debriefing meetings after each of these events and made recommendations which will increase Florida's capacity to respond to future events.

A NFWF grant proposal seeking funding to improve right whale disentanglement response efforts in the Southeastern United States by facilitating collaboration and training among responders was submitted and funded.

### **Presentations and Outreach**

The coordinator attended the NOAA Fisheries NER Stranding Network meeting in Virginia Beach, Virginia as an invited speaker presenting on propeller wounds in cetaceans. The coordinator presented on right whales to the St Augustine Rotary Club, and provided a right whale lecture as part of a University of Florida sponsored teacher training seminar held at the Whitney Laboratories in St. Augustine, Florida. The coordinator participated in several meetings with FWC, GDNR, and NMFS to discuss the text and message for a right whale informational sign. Funding for this project was provided by NFWF in a separate grant. Participants prioritized the sign's message, highlighting important information such as the 500 yard federal restriction. These signs have been installed at targeted marinas and boat ramps adjacent to right whale habitat in the southeast.

### **Management**

The coordinator attended the ALWTRT meeting in Baltimore, Maryland. The coordinator co-chaired two meetings of the Southeast right whale recovery plan implementation team (SEIT). At these meetings, the coordinator led a sub-committee of the SEIT to help evaluate communication issues that resulted in better efficiency of the communication network to mitigate ship-strikes. The coordinator worked with Liberty Communications, the observer teams, and network participants to maintain the EWS pager and email notification system. It is the coordinators responsibility to ensure that the communication system works correctly and efficiently. The coordinator contributed to a State contingency plan for right whale strandings off Florida that was submitted to NOAA Fisheries for review.



Figure 1. Tom Pitchford and Andy Garrett undergo whale disentanglement training on Cape Cod Bay.



Figure 2. Pitchford prepares to biopsy a right whale while training with NEA crew.